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# Anti-Poverty Activism from a CHAT Perspective: A Comparison of Learning across Three Organizations

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Keywords: social movement learning; activity theory; anti-poverty organizing

**Abstract:** Based on research from the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project, Marxist Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is used to explore forms of anti-poverty activist learning: i) program-based community anti-poverty activism; ii) grassroots capacity building; and iii) direct collective action. Different types and origins of contradictions and key mediating artefacts are shown to offer a means of defining distinctive processes of learning and collective development.

## Introduction

This paper is framed by the work of Piven and Cloward (e.g. 1977, 1982), Katznelson (1982), their identification of community organizing dimension of class warfare, the dispersed linkages between community and economy, as well as the more recent reinvigoration of these concerns in the work of Defilippis, Fisher and Shragge (2010). The goals of these works, however, were never to outline the processes of learning and change that ultimately underwrite such organizing and resistance. Thus, in this paper I seek to extend this orientation to empirical analysis comparing and contrasting the modes of activist learning in relation to three key forms of anti-poverty organizing: i) program-based community anti-poverty activism; ii) grassroots capacity building; and iii) direct collective action. To do this I draw on recently completed case study research from within an ongoing project entitled Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL; [www.apcol.ca](http://www.apcol.ca)).<sup>1</sup>

Below I also respond to the recognition that researching learning in social movements is challenging, and this begins with the fact that *learning* in social movements, and anti-poverty organizing in particular, is not typically a goal of the actors involved. This simple fact underscores the need to recognize self-conscious goals as inadequate on their own, and that viable analytic approaches must include attention to tacit dimensions, the role of the structure of social participation, and recognition that people create the conditions of their own learning. Moreover, in the case of anti-poverty organizing this activity is fraught with the experiences of urgency and a lack of personal and organizational resources. The contingencies of this activity, in other words, are defining elements. To better realize the concern for organizing and resistance so well outlined by the authors' works mentioned at the outset, I suggest among the approaches most useful is Marxist CHAT (see Niewolny & Wilson, 2009).

## Activity and Anti-Poverty Activism

Activities organize our lives. In activities, humans develop their skills, personalities and consciousness. Through activities, we also transform our social

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conditions, resolve contradictions, generate new cultural artefacts, and create new forms of life and the self. (Sannino, Daniels & Gutiérrez, 2009, p.1)

Activity in this sense refers to the way that social life is created and structured by the multiple, overlapping and yet analytically distinguishable – conflictually and cooperatively *shared* – purposes of practice; what in CHAT language are referred to as object/motives of activity. Overviews of CHAT can be found elsewhere and shall not be repeated here beyond to say that there are several sub-streams within the approach. The Marxist, and more broadly still the non-canonical, tradition of CHAT analysis forefronts contradictory relations rooted in people's material lives and their struggle to transform and not merely adapt to the world around them (e.g. Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006; Langemeyer & Roth, 2006; Avis, 2007; Sawchuk, 2007; Sawchuk & Stetsenko, 2008). From this perspective, as it was for Vygotsky (e.g. 1987), Leontiev (1978) and a sub-set of others since, the conceptualization of activity represented an extension of the basic Marxist dictum (e.g. 1971) that social being – how we go about our everyday lives – determines consciousness. As has been more recently pointed out it is a conceptualization that is in fact “underwritten by [an] ideology of empowerment and social justice” fore-fronting the “collaborative purposeful transformation of the world [as the] principled grounding for learning and development” (Stetsenko, 2008, pp.471, 474). In other words, it is an approach that claims there is an inherent ontological relationship between *learning* and *contestation* (Sawchuk, in press), where contestation is a distinctive moment of dialectical contradiction. The concept of dialectical contradiction is not reducible to contention, however nor is it meaningfully separable from it if we understand contestation temporally *and* through its full range of variation. Contestation/contradiction is historical and it comes in many mundane as well as dramatic forms.

More generally in CHAT tradition, it is recognized however that people are *shaped by* the competing object/motives of activity (i.e. why the activity is taking place) *and* agentively *shape* the object/motives of activity. Analysis of these processes of constructing and re-formulating the ‘why’ of activity is one means of accounting for the otherwise spectacularly complex flow of everyday experience that constitutes people's real and ongoing learning lives. Building from such a perspective, Lektorsky (1999) reminds us that “in order to create or change 'inner' or subjective phenomena, it is necessary to create some objective thing” (p.67). And it is this same process that, paraphrasing Leontiev, Miettinen (2005) references in the statement: “need becomes a motive capable of directing actions only when it finds its object” (p.54). Following this core point, it nevertheless remains essential to distinguish different forms of activist learning and development by reference also to *actions* and the conscious *goals* to which they are directed; to distinguish un-self-conscious *operations* and the corresponding *conditions* to which they respond; to link analysis of object/motive, actions and operations as a process of social and individual construction and contestation. Together such features of activity analysis produce a dialectical, internally referential whole.

With a dialectical approach to activity as the minimal building block for analysis, below I outline key distinctions within and between different forms of anti-poverty activism learning. Central to this are the key mediating artefacts as well as an account of the origins and relations of contradiction across different levels of activity. These conceptual tools, I argue, allow us to begin to make more understandable how specific modes of thinking, knowing, feeling, talking and acting are organized and reproduced under otherwise ambiguous, free-flowing and highly contingent efforts.

### **An Outline of Learning in Three Forms of Anti-Poverty Activity**

Below, case study research from the APCOL project is used to analyze activist learning in the three distinct contexts identified in the introduction. It draws on individual learning life history interviews (n= 38), focus groups (4), participatory observation and secondary research. Space prohibits more than an outline of the analysis. Nevertheless, we see below that as regards anti-poverty related activity, informal learning is entirely dominant in each instance, but that distinctive learning processes are clear. Table 1 collects together key features of the activity and does not claim to explain this learning. Rather it simply offers a means of focusing attention on specific mediations, and in particular, different patterns of contradiction that – expressing the descriptions of activity provided in the data – set the stage for understanding the different outcomes of activist learning as a form of politically and economically situated forms of mundane as well as dramatic contestation activity.

#### *Activist Learning in Program-based Activity*

The first case (“PBO”, Table 1) involves a community outreach initiative based in an urban community college in Toronto where a trade pre-apprenticeship program formally aims to facilitate better employment chances amongst marginalized young adults in particular neighbourhoods, and informally hopes to contribute to the empowerment of those in marginalized neighbourhoods. This form of community anti-poverty service activism involves what could be termed emergent activists (the program participants) and service worker activists.

A key feature which helps explain how and why learning occurs in the way it does revolves firstly around mediations stemming from the specific program and, in turn, around those related to three contradictory object/motives: those rooted in the funding contract, the broader individual participant need for employment, and finally the employment needs of program workers themselves. The data demonstrates the degree to which the specific (self-conscious and un-self-conscious) learning projects are oriented to, construct and re-construct these object/motives of activity. Learning and potential activist development can be seen to flow from constant attempts (both cooperative and conflictual) to reconcile the contradiction amongst each of these in relation to the goal-direct actions aimed primarily at labour market success for program participants.

Equally relevant is the learning which, while stemming from this complex of object/motives, centres on the more mundane operations listed in Table 1. Prominent is the learning described by program participants (under-/un-employed, disproportionately Black, working-class males without high school diplomas) struggle to make sense of labour market access and experience which are heavily mediated by the confluence of their novice status in the trade and processes of active racialization. Indeed, the analysis demonstrates the defining learning process revolves around resolving such contradictions through their active production of social networks, primarily among program participants, which give rise to new mediational supports/artefacts. Importantly, such activity as a whole has likewise motivated new efforts by participants to engage other youth in their neighbourhood buoyed by the positive, albeit sometimes uneven, results of their program experiences.

These processes however cannot be fully appreciated without attention to the participation of program workers. Their learning unfolds primarily as a struggle with object-related contradictions originating from the need to sustain labour market partnerships – a need that in part undermines the resolution of the contradictions as experienced from the standpoint of

participants in the work placements. The program workers themselves experience significant pressures of contingent employment which explain how their learning revolves around contradictions between daily operations, goal-directed actions and by extension those contradictions originating at the object/motive level of activity as a whole. Finally, the satisfaction of community (as opposed to individual participant) need – a need that finds no object of its own – within this activity remains nascent and fragile despite the potential voiced in the spontaneous declarations of commitment by participants to return to their neighbourhood and mentor youth informally. Across these developments we see forms of activist/participant/program-worker learning that re-structure activity in the course of participation and in so doing struggles to produce alternative object/motives of activity.

### *Activist Learning in Grassroots Capacity Building Activity*


The second case (“GRO”; Table 1) features grassroots neighbourhood group/organization in which housing issues have been established as the formal concern. However, in analysis of the data in terms of activity from the perspective of rank-and-file members, what became clear was that housing issues were not actually the dominant object/motive which could be seen to mediate activity. Rather, the object-relatedness of activist learning seemed to revolve around a far more general issue that can be called community building; a term understandable in this case as a concern to address a more generalized experience of isolation, if not alienation, of residents from one another and from their surroundings generally (see Sawan, in press).

Attention to the object/motive analysis begins to explain how and why activist learning revolves so intensely around expanding networks of relationships producing recognizable actions/learning (e.g. engagement in events, meetings). It also explains why, although intense amongst paid staff, information seeking appears less prevalent amongst rank-and-file participants. Interestingly, the influence of funding from a Toronto service organization (funds that pay for an organizer and modest resources but otherwise are not linked to the direction of the work) remains marginal. The key source of contradiction driving learning originates at the operational level of activity. Specifically, while the practices mediated by the local housing strategy offers a means of effectively realizing the object/motive of activity, engagement with either municipal or provincial government is less so. The contradictions that remain either partially or completely unresolved – and which may act to partially stagnate forms of activist learning – are revealed in the relatively passive rank-and-file engagement over whether or not to engage with, for example, local municipal or provincial politics for example. At the same time, learning revolving around relations of either direct (personal) or block (organizational partnership) recruitment, far from contradicting the dominant object/motive, realize it and generate intense engagement and learning. Here the need for engagement is transformed into an energetic interest capable of directing action because it has found its object (i.e. social networks).

What becomes particularly clear is the vibrancy of activist learning, a significant proportion of which can be attributed to the absence of contradiction originating at the object/motive level of activity. The capacity for collective externalization describes activist learning through the effective production of new mediating artefacts: e.g., objects of anti-poverty grievance (problem identification that, for example, does not fixate on money); and, a flourishing ‘Community Speaks’ forum series. Neither coincidentally nor insignificantly, such forms of activity draw on the existence of a pool of mobilization artefacts: e.g., not simply actual concrete alterations to, for example, transportation services or the establishment of a services hub in the neighbourhood or the specific knowledge and skills in dealing with the complex tapestry of

municipal governance, but also the narratives of community organizing success that circulate. In sum, these activists make use of the rich history of organizing in the neighbourhood as a mediator of their activity/learning.

Table 1: Activity in Three Anti-Poverty Activist Learning Forms

	<b>PBO</b>	<b>GRO</b>	<b>DAT</b>
<i>(Key Artefact in Activist Learning)</i> 	(Program)	(Network)	(Case)
<i>Dominant Object/Motive(s)</i>	State Program Contract; Employment of Participants; Maintenance of Individual Employment for Program Workers	Community Building	Capacity Building for Social Transformation
<i>Dominant Goal</i>	Labour Market Success of Individual Participants	Local Housing Strategy	Direct Action Casework
<i>Dominant Operations Level</i>	Service of State Contract; Maintenance of Employer and Union Relation to Program; Recruitment of Participants vis-à-vis Service Organization Networks; Building of Participant Networks	Community Organization Influence Building; Integration with the Local Municipal and Provincial Political Infrastructure; Service of Not-for-Profit Contract	Knowledge/Evaluation of Case; Ideological Integration; Efficient Administrative Operation of Office; Recruitment of Activists; Accumulation of material resources
		Individual and Block Recruitment of Participants; Efficient Operation of Leadership Committee; Gathering and use of basic resources	

#### *Activist Learning in Direct Action Casework Activity*

In the final case (“DAT”, Table 1) we see activist learning that is quite different again. This is a case study based on secondary analysis of the significant body of literature already available on the organization in question. It is supplemented by original research interviews. Important in relation to an activity analysis, we find in this case little evidence of contradiction related to much less originating from the object/motive level of activity. There is no state funding

involved, and indeed any external funding received is consciously and carefully managed in relation to object/motives, mediated by established artefacts (e.g. specified political position on funding relationships). Interestingly, contradictions related to the matter of funding relationships appear almost exclusively at the goal level of activity where it takes the form of (resolvable) conflicts over the use of direct-action tactics, choice of target and so on. In short, a fundamentally different pattern of activist learning content and process is seen. It is one based on the strong and persistent mediation of activist dialogue and learning by what can be called the *direct action casework artefact* (i.e. a case generated by a citizen approaching the organization with a problem related to poverty). This artefact, tying almost seamlessly the object/motive, goals and operations of activity, produces self-conscious knowledge and skill development, information finding, learning-in-direct-action, and myriad additional topics of activist learning virtually all flow from it.

From the perspective of effective activist learning, the significance of this form of integration should not be underestimated. More than any of the other system of activity described in this analysis, such forms of activity allow the consistent (albeit never be exclusive) engagements with the challenges of social transformation project rather than the contradictions within activist activity itself. This means that, while conflict (in this case specifically debates over ideology as well as techniques and targets) might appear on a regular basis, the direct action casework activity system allows for the resolution of many of the internal contradictions these may entail because of the unified structure of mediation. Indeed, from an activity analysis centred on activist learning, any difficulties that remain seem according to the research extremely contained, originating if at all, largely at the level of operations (e.g. the ongoing need for basic resources and perhaps recruitment, although even this is not clearly seen in the data or secondary research). Even ideological contradictions, mediated by the case artefact, seem not simply manageable but rather a not inconsequential source of learning.

### **Concluding Discussion**

As DeFilippis et al (2010) note, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves that activist communities do not emerge “autonomously and fully formed” (p.68). They are made, in context. And in this sense a CHAT perspective argues specific patterns of mediated participation and sense-making which occurs vis-à-vis shifting relations across levels of activity (object/motive, goal, operation) allow us to see this process. Having undertaken an outline of salient dynamics in this way a more meaningful understanding of statements from activists themselves emerges. Asked what the most important lessons learned in the course of their participation they told us:

I want to emphasize on the networking amongst us was very important because sometimes when you are trying to get a job or you're at the job, like pressure and stuff you need somebody... The connection between us helps you last. (PBO)

Simple things... that's what I'm working toward. You see the kids play, you watch the seniors gather... it's like when somebody went through a tough thing this week. I say, 'Call me. If you need to talk, just call me.' That's where it starts. A problem shared is a problem cut in half. (GRO)

We can't tell people that we can build a better society if we can't prevent people from getting evicted or getting their lights cut off... But if we are going to advocate for people there has to be a certain level of knowledge of the systems. There also has to be

discussion about what we are trying to achieve. For us we do a great deal of case work, but the idea of case work is that it's important because it assists people but that it has a political role in building the organization. (DAT)

Such data are neither irrelevant nor are they adequate in themselves. Placed within an analysis of activity as broadly representative statements they obliquely summarize the broader as well as deeper patterns of practice that account for activist learning in different forms of anti-poverty work.

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